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ABSTRACT

What do 14-year-old students know about democratic institutions and processes? What skills do they possess to understand and interpret political communication? Do they hold concepts of citizenship and democracy similar to those held by adults in their societies? What role do schools and other civic organizations play in the civic development of adolescents? These and other questions were examined by researchers in 28 democracies during Phase 2 of the 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study. The findings provide a snapshot of what young adolescents know and think about democratic institutions and processes as well as their attitudes and plans for future civic participation. This ERIC Digest discusses the origin and administration of the 1999 IEA Civic Education Study, the research design, and the findings of the study. (BB)

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# Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age 14 in 28 Countries: Results from the IEA Civic Education Study

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The well being of any democratic society largely depends on its ability to instill in youth the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for active, informed citizenship. In many countries educators, researchers, and the public are concerned about engaging children and adolescents in civic life. As political, social, and economic structures change along with technology and access to information, the need to involve young people seems especially pressing.

What do fourteen-year-old students know about democratic institutions and processes? What skills do they possess to understand and interpret political communication? Do they hold concepts of citizenship and democracy similar to those held by adults in their societies? What role do schools and other civic organizations play in the civic development of adolescents? These and other questions were examined by researchers in 28 democracies during Phase 2 of the 1999 IEA Civic Education Study. The findings provide a snapshot of what young adolescents know and think about democratic institutions and processes as well as their attitudes and plans for future civic participation. This Digest discusses the origin and administration of the 1999 IEA Civic Education Study, the research design, and the findings of the study.

**The 1999 IEA Civic Education Study.** The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), headquartered in Amsterdam, is a consortium of research institutes and agencies in more than 50 countries. Since the late 1950s, IEA has carried out nearly 20 large, cross-national studies of educational achievement in various curriculum areas. The 1999 Civic Education Study, the first IEA study in this subject area since 1971, was ambitious in both concept and scope. Approximately 90,000 fourteen-year-old students from 28 countries as well as thousands of their teachers and school principals participated in the study.

The study was carried out in two phases. In the first phase (1996-97), researchers conducted qualitative case studies to examine the contexts and meanings of civic education in 24 countries (Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999). The observations from the national case studies were then used to develop the instruments for Phase 2 of the study. In this second phase (1999), nationally representative samples of fourteen-year-old students from 28 countries were tested on their civic knowledge and skills as well as surveyed on their attitudes, concepts, and willingness to participate in civic activities.

The countries participating in the test and survey of fourteen-year-olds in 1999 included Australia, Belgium (French), Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. Canada and the Netherlands participated only in the case study phase; Israel tested and surveyed an older population of students.

**Research Design.** Three domains were identified as important topics in civic education across democracies: (1) Democracy and Democratic Institutions; (2) National Identity; and (3) Social Cohesion and Diversity. Test and survey items were then written to assess student knowledge and skills as well as attitudes in these three domains. Specifically, students were tested on their knowledge of democratic processes and institutions and their skills at interpreting political communication (for example, interpreting the messages of a political cartoon and an election leaflet). In addition, students were surveyed on their concepts of democracy and citizenship, their attitudes toward their countries and political institutions, the political rights of women and immigrants, and their anticipated civic participation as adults.

The test and survey were administered to students in the modal grade for fourteen-year-olds by national research teams in accordance with IEA technical guidelines and policies. Teachers and school principals were also surveyed.

**Selected Findings.** Broadly speaking, the overall goal of the study was to identify and examine in a comparative framework the ways in which young people are prepared for their roles as citizens in democracies. An underlying assumption was that civic education is complex and involves a variety of cognitive, conceptual, and attitudinal strands, each of which is important and can be evaluated. The findings supported that assumption and provided a portrait of adolescents' civic development.

Results from the test of civic knowledge suggest that students in most of the participating countries have a basic understanding of fundamental democratic processes, values, and institutions. For example, 75 percent of student respondents in the international sample were able to identify the reason for having more than one political party, while 69 percent correctly answered a question on the importance of being able to join a variety of organizations.

Most students also were able to answer most questions dealing with fundamental laws and political rights, and most recognized the importance of basic democratic processes

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such as free elections. Their understanding of some democratic values and institutions, however, was not strongly demonstrated. For example, only 57 percent of the students could identify the main message of a political cartoon about a country's wish to de-emphasize problematic aspects of its history. A similar proportion could infer the possible political consequences of a large publishing company buying and controlling many newspaper publishing companies.

Students demonstrated moderate skill in interpreting political materials. For example, 65 percent of the respondents were able to identify the position of a party that had issued an election leaflet.

Interestingly, there was little difference between civic knowledge scores of male and female students. When other factors were held constant, female students scored slightly lower on the civic knowledge test than did males. When the gender comparison was made without holding other factors constant, however, there was a sizable difference in only 1 of the 28 countries.

A promising finding was related to the students' willingness to vote. Eighty percent of the respondents indicated they plan to vote as adults. This finding, however, seems paradoxical in light of actual voter turn out rates. That is, in many of the participating countries, there is a substantial gap between the number of fourteen-year-olds who say they plan to vote and actual practices reflected in voting statistics.

In all of the countries, the more students knew about democratic institutions and processes, the more likely they were to plan on voting as adults. In addition, the more strongly students perceived that their schools teach about the importance of voting, the more likely they were to indicate that they will vote. Through the curriculum and in providing an open classroom climate for discussion and inquiry, schools seem to be effective in promoting both civic knowledge and engagement.

Although students are willing to vote, they seemed skeptical about other traditional forms of political engagement. Four out of five students in all countries responded that they do not plan on engaging in conventional political activities such as joining a political party, running for office, or writing a letter to a newspaper about a social or political concern. They were willing, however, to engage in other forms of civic engagement, such as collecting money for a social cause or participating in a non-violent protest march. They thought it is important for adult citizens to participate in groups benefitting the community and preserving the environment.

Finally, with respect to attitudes, the IEA results indicate that students are supportive of the political rights of women and immigrants. Almost 90 percent of the students agreed with items about women having the same rights as men and being entitled to equal pay. In addition, 90 percent of the students agreed that immigrants should have the right to equal educational opportunities. Here, unlike in the case of the knowledge score, there were gender differences. In all countries females were much more likely than males to support rights for women, and in many countries females were more likely than males to support immigrant rights.

**Conclusion.** The most important overall conclusion of the IEA Civic Education Study is that schools can make important differences in the civic education of youth. They can help students acquire knowledge about fundamental democratic processes and skills in interpreting civic-related information. Further, by providing opportunities for open and respectful discussion of opinions in the classroom, teachers can prepare their students for responsible and effective engagement in a democracy. For more information, visit the study Web site <www.wam.umd.edu/~iea/>.

Copies of *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries* (which includes cross-national comparisons in the test and survey) can be obtained from the IEA Secretariat. Herengracht 487; 1017 BT, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Telephone: + 31 20 625 3625; Fax: + 31 20 420 7136; E-mail: <Department@iea.nl>.

**References and ERIC Resources**. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.


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